

May 21st, 2018

Turtle Lake, WI

Greetings Members of the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding:

Thank you for establishing this commission and listening to citizen's thoughts and concerns. My name is Bob Wright and I live in the Osceola School District in southern Polk County. I also coordinate the advocacy group Saint Croix Valley Friends of Public Education, established two budget cycles ago, after another round of significant cuts. I am here today to advocate for adequate funding for our public schools. I am going to leave the specifics of that to those who are smarter than me. I'm going to tell you the story of how state funding cuts have affected the Osceola School District community.

The Osceola School District did a great job educating my kids. When the first big cuts happened in 2011 and 2012, I started attending school board meetings to determine for myself whether or not the Osceola School District was spending our hard-earned tax dollars wisely. They were. They were refinancing debt at lower rates, implementing energy efficient facility updates, anticipating future needs and looking for the best instructional strategies.

But this only takes you so far when state funds are inadequate and the legislature limits the ability of local communities to make up for these cuts. The Osceola School District has responded with staff cuts, staff paying more for insurance, support staff being reduced to half time with no benefits, millions in deferred facility maintenance, and longer bus replacement rotations. Here's a more specific example: When my kids started back in 2002, OSD had a K-12 Spanish language program. Very forward-thinking when you consider that Spanish is the second most common language in the US and we have few native speakers in our community. Now we have 1 Spanish teacher, it is high school only, and it is difficult to meet the demand.

This brings me to last spring's referendum. With the district looking at significant budget shortfalls into the foreseeable future, the school board voted unanimously to ask the voters for a more consistent funding stream. While there will always be differences of opinion, some chose the tactics of lies and divisiveness, and even violating federal law by putting misleading flyers in people's mailboxes. (You may or may not know that only postal carriers may put things in your

mailbox.) We even had former representative Eric Severson stand up at a public information meeting and call the school board a bunch of liars. In all of this nastiness, there was never an acknowledgement that we as the community should be giving our kids the best education possible.

The referendum failed, and the school board had to immediately make over \$800,000 in budget cuts. Six staff positions, including our only French teacher (which we were able to get back later when a Spanish teacher took another job), more maintenance deferred, curriculum upgrades deferred. The school board meeting was packed and there were a lot of tears. You should have been there. Those cuts only covered this current school year. More are on the horizon and they will be even more significant, so the district is considering again asking the local voters to raise taxes on themselves. Will it be as contentious and divisive as last spring's? I sure hope not.

I end by voicing my opposition to private school vouchers. Thousands of dollars more per pupil than public schools get, limited accountability to taxpayers and taken right off the top of state school funds. This spring Valley Christian School, the local voucher school, was paying to have flyers put in our grocery bags advertising "free" tuition. It's not free! It is our tax dollars. Last year it cost the Osceola School District over \$84,000 dollars. That's salary and fringe for one of the Spanish teachers we lost. Overall, private school vouchers have cost Wisconsin's public schools \$270 million dollars. Until the state provides our public schools with adequate funding, it is time to roll that program back.

Thanks again for providing this opportunity to comment.

Bob Wright

Dresser, WI

Osceola School District, Polk County